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ABSTRACT

This paper examines an effort to support "bottom-up" change that responds to larger school reform initiatives. The intervention strategy involved a collaboration in which a cluster of rural schools designed and implemented site-based projects related to multicultural reform, and a regional college and the state department of education provided professional development and technical assistance tailored to specific projects. Named EMPIRE (Exemplary Multicultural Practices in Rural Education), the strategy was implemented in pilot projects in two states. Participating schools enrolled 70-700 students; included both elementary and secondary levels; and served predominantly European American, predominantly Native American, or heterogeneous populations. The project's research component focused on identifying teacher outcomes and school changes that could be attributed to the intervention, exploring the extent to which clustering supported development of a regional professional infrastructure and lateral learning across schools, and describing how resources were shared across schools. Preliminary results from case studies indicate that: (1) all schools were successful in designing locally meaningful and sustainable projects; (2) schools that joined clusters later built on the experiences of earlier schools; (3) projects had a broader than expected impact on schools; (4) clusters increased resource sharing across each region; (5) the character of schools selected for the cluster created a learning environment for individual teachers and schools; and (6) measurable outcomes and long-range planning were often barriers to project implementation. (Contains 10 references). (SV)

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Rural School Reform: Creating a Community of Learners

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Rural School Reform: Creating a

Community of Learners

The most visible efforts at school reform have been 'top-down' - experts advising SEAs or state legislators, who then enact policy that schools must implement. Some schools change; many do not. In some cases, the very policies intended to strengthen schools actually weaken them. In nearly all cases, the pace at which mandates or programs are enacted make it virtually impossible for schools to integrate one set of changes before being asked to take on another. In still other situations, more recent mandates contradict earlier mandates, leaving teachers mystified as to how to respond (Cohen and Ball, 1990). Moreover, subject matter reform initiatives often ignore the obvious - that teachers can't teach in ways they haven't learned. Teaching and learning are linked such that teachers must first be allowed to learn in new ways before they can teach in new ways.

This study reports on an intervention designed to explore how to support 'bottom-up' change that responds to larger school reform initiatives. The intervention strategy involved a collaboration among a regional college, the state department of education, and a cluster of rural schools. Participating schools were asked to design and implement a project related to multicultural reform. The regional college and state department of education provided professional development and technical assistance that responded to the specific projects being implemented. Clusters have now been operating for five years, offering insight into what elements are needed to sustain a bottom-up change initiative.

Background

Research conducted into rural school change (Nachtigal, 1982) suggests a number of factors that influence the likelihood that meaningful and sustained change will occur. Efforts to generalize across the thirteen case studies presented led

McLaughlin (1982) to conclude that the durability of rural school improvement efforts depend on factors which are community dependent. The problem defined must be one which is appropriate to the school and community. The process of change must acknowledge and build on local resources rather than be heavily supported by outside funds or controlled by change agents outside of the community. McLaughlin goes on to point out that efforts at rural school improvement require outside assistance, but that such assistance needs to acknowledge local conditions and respond to the manner in which the project unfolds. These factors were supported by case studies conducted on rural schools which had sustained multicultural reform over a period of five years or more. Although these schools responded to a problem that had been articulated at the national level, they translated that problem into one which had local meaning (Spears, et al., 1990). In addition, the process of change evolved in response to the interests and resources of the local school and community.

Intervention/Objectives

Emerging from these discussions, the Rural Clearinghouse launched the EMPIRE Project (Exemplary Multicultural Practices in Rural Education), an intervention strategy designed to support locally initiated efforts at multicultural reform. Creating "connections" is at the cornerstone of multicultural education. In order for educational institutions to fulfill their role with regard to cultural diversity, connections must be made. Higher education and elementary and secondary education have infrequently established connections regarding the students that they share (Odell & Mock, 1989). Increasingly, however, this mode of operation seems to be changing. Connections between schools and higher education seems to be increasingly important. EMPIRE's intervention strategy was based on creating connections among three primary partners: a regional college, the state department of education, and selected elementary and secondary schools/community sites.

Several assumptions guided the work of the project: (1) the process of why and how schools and their communities would achieve a more culturally responsible or representative school environment was critical to providing a framework that other rural schools could learn and benefit from; (2) that rural schools and their communities would be most receptive to information that described change that occurred within an existing organizational structures rather than one that prescribed significant structural change either within the school, community or both; (3) that the context in which the process of change occurred was relevant to other rural schools as they attempt to transfer information; (4) that the higher degree of collaboration among schools and their communities, then the more integrated multicultural reform plans and outcomes they will experience; and, (5) that lateral collaborations (e.g. among peers) provide an important filter for information sharing, storing, and utilization.

Two states become involved as pilot projects, creating their own regional connections/collaboratives. The connections were characterized by new players, the linking of existing and new resources, and connections of non-traditional partners. Each state collaborative was represented by a different type of higher education institutions (one a mid-sized public university and the other a small, private college), their respective state department of education, and school/community sites, chosen for their diversity in size, ethnic composition, and structure. The participating schools ranged in size from 70 students to 700 students and included both elementary and secondary levels. The schools served predominately European American, Native American, or heterogeneous populations.

The focus of the cluster's work became a series of site-based projects in multicultural reform, designed by the participating school/community site. The schools were asked to form a team involving representation from the administration, teaching staff, and local community. With support from the collaborative, the teams were charged with the responsibility for framing their own locally defined questions about

multicultural reform -- what does multicultural reform mean for you community and your students -- and then constructing their own responses. Team members in each school then designed and implemented a project that responded to their locally defined needs, and the regional college/state department of education provided professional development, technical and financial assistance. In its non-traditional fashion, the EMPIRE Project created an environment in which the school teams became the experts for their own reform work while the colleges and state departments supported and studied that work.

The research component of the project focused on understanding what role 'bottom-up' change can play in larger school reform efforts. Specific research objectives included:

(1) to identify what teacher outcomes can be attributed to the cluster strategy.

(2) to identify what teacher outcomes can be attributed to the 'bottom-up' approach to school change.

(3) to identify what school changes can be attributed to the intervention.

(4) to explore the extent to which clustering supports the development of the professional infrastructure within the region.

(5) to explore the extent to which clustering supports lateral learning across teachers or across schools.

(6) to describe how resources are shared across participating schools

.Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical framework which guided data collection and case study documentation was drawn from four sources. At the individual level, the Concerns Based Adoption Model (Hall et al., 1975) and stages of individual teacher development (Fuller and Brown,1975) provided frameworks from which to explore teacher concerns as well as growth within the cluster activities. At the school, community and regional level, the concept of social infrastructure proved helpful.

Used primarily by sociologists to understand how human capital becomes transformed into community growth (Coleman, 1988), the framework of social infrastructure led us to explore growth in human resources, quality of professional networks, and the capacity of local schools. Finally, structures specific to multicultural reform in schools (Banks, 1977; Kehoe, 1983; and Boyer, 1985) guided the specific research into the extent to which school change and individual change reflected personal growth in understanding multicultural reform.

Method of Study/Data Gathered

As described earlier, this proposal focuses on research conducted as part of a development project. The focus of the development project was to explore the capacity of a cluster design to support sustained, bottom-up change and rural schools. The research component of the project focused on: (1) documenting the process used in each cluster, (2) examining the role assumed by each of the three collaborators as well as their participation as 'learners' in the experience, and (3) identifying the changes and outcomes that occurred at the individual, school, and regional level. Research followed a case-study methodology, using documents, participant evaluations and interviews, as well as third-party case study reports to record observations. The information gathered was examined and synthesized at two levels. The university partner and site coordinator examined the information independently and drafted reports. The information gathered and these reports were then examined by the project's principle investigator, who had not been involved in the day-to-day work with either the rural school sites or the university partner. Third-party case study authors or observers were asked to confirm independently the school-specific information through site visits conducted periodically throughout the project. The outcomes reported in this paper are those for which agreement was found across all levels.

Results and Conclusions

With regard to the outcomes of the intervention, we found that: (1) while the schools differed in the sophistication they brought to the design of multicultural intervention, all were successful in designing projects that were locally meaningful and sustainable, (2) schools which joined the cluster in later years appear to have been able to build on the experiences of earlier schools, introducing projects that were more sophisticated, (3) projects had an impact on the school that was much broader than had been expected, (4) clusters provided an effective vehicle for increasing the extent to which resources could be shared across the region, (5) the character of schools selected for the cluster created an environment in which individual teachers deepened their own understanding of multicultural reform and schools themselves gained a regional perspective of the social and political issues they face, and (6) measurable outcomes/long-range planning often acted as barriers to project implementation.

These and other results will be discussed in terms of understanding out to use school reform to create "communities of learners" among professional educators. Significant reform cannot occur until teachers and administrators are provided opportunities to learn in ways that reform efforts are now asking teachers to teach. The research reported in this paper provides some preliminary evidence of the types of reform strategies that can be helpful to sustaining 'bottom-up' change.

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